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OPINION

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IDAHO EDUCATION NETWORK REACHES AN HISTORIC MILESTONE

By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter

You might have heard or read in my recent State of the State address about my December visit to St. Maries High School in northern Idaho. I went there to commemorate the completed connection of all 194 Idaho high schools to the Idaho Education Network (IEN).

I came away more impressed than ever by the potential for this incredible tool and this great milestone in Idaho's history. It truly is welcoming the world into classrooms – and the minds of students – all over our state.

That visit to St. Maries marked the start of an era in which high school students' educational opportunities no longer are restricted by time zone, ZIP code or geography. Like transcontinental railroads and the interstate highway system, the IEN is an example of how barriers can be overcome with well managed public-private partnerships.

Thanks to the Idaho Legislature, Superintendent Tom Luna, the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation and my Department of Administration, I am proud to say that we finished installing high-speed Internet connections at every Idaho high school nearly a year ahead of schedule and 16 percent under budget.

That's how an efficient government should work for Idaho.

The IEN is redefining our Idaho public schools by guiding them from the Industrial Age – where distance limited opportunities for world-class learning – to the Information Age, where opportunities for our students extend as far as their imaginations. Whether it's St. Maries or Sugar-Salem, Soda Springs or Sandpoint, all our high schools now have access to the same cutting-edge instruction thanks to their connection to the IEN.

Prior to the IEN, some schools had less broadband connectivity than many homes. In some cases, we increased the bandwidth for schools that already had an Internet connection by many times what it was. Now, school districts like Meridian, Weiser, Twin Falls and Bear Lake are creating and tapping into advanced learning opportunities that improve the chances of students achieving college success – including more ways for even the most remotely located students to earn college credits while completing high school studies.

These students will be the leaders, entrepreneurs, CEOs, doctors and teachers who will drive Idaho's success in an increasingly competitive and connected world.

And the IEN serves more than high school students; it serves communities.

Idaho State University's Workforce Training team is using the IEN to bring business classes to chambers of commerce members and classes for firefighters to rural Idaho towns. The Peace Officers Standards and Training Academy in Meridian is delivering classes to officers as far away as Lemhi and Bonner counties.

Those examples and many others will contribute to a more vibrant and diverse economy because we will have more highly educated and better-trained citizens attracting businesses and enabling the ones we already have to grow.

Back in St. Maries, by collaborating with St. Louis University's School of Medicine, anatomy and physiology students experienced what even a generation ago would have seemed impossible. They get to see and talk live with doctors about medicine and science – from 1,800 miles away.

St. Maries Principal John Cordell and Superintendent Joe Kren are showing that, with the help of technology, they can create opportunities for students and communities that are as critical to their success as the arrival of the schoolmarm in Idaho's hardscrabble pioneer towns more than a century ago.

In communities throughout Idaho, champions like John and Joe in Idaho schools large and small are finding innovative ways to tear down barriers to educational excellence and helping students and communities achieve their dreams.

Now that the high schools are connected, we next will work to bring broadband Internet to even more schools in every corner of Idaho. Meanwhile, dedicated and innovative educators like John and Joe are expanding the rigor and options in Idaho schools with technology to serve all learners – even Governors.

Please check out what's possible in your community by going to www.iem.idaho.gov.

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